

NEW YORK TIMES  
13 January 1985

## Pro and Con: Use and Abuse of Lie-Detector Tests

# Pentagon Screening Program Sets Off Some Alarms

**S**INCE a polygraph machine was used during World War II to screen scientists hired to help develop the atomic bomb, the military has been taken with the "lie detector." Under President Reagan, the Pentagon has almost doubled its use of the instrument to screen applicants for jobs in the intelligence agencies, to investigate security breaches, to test foreigners hired as agents and, on at least one occasion, to track down the source of a news leak.

On Jan. 3, the Pentagon announced it would begin using the device to screen non-intelligence em-

ployees and civilian contractors who have access to highly classified information. The Defense Department has Congressional clearance to try the program for a year, conducting 3,500 tests, after which Pentagon officials would like to expand it.

Representative Jack Brooks, Democrat of Texas, has long been skeptical about the effectiveness and fairness of the polygraph. As chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, he has introduced legislation to limit the use of the instrument. Richard G. Stilwell, a retired Army general who is Deputy Under Secretary of Defense

for Policy, has headed the Pentagon's internal security efforts that led to the new polygraph program. In 1982, following a Washington Post report of a classified Pentagon budget meeting, General Stilwell ordered polygraphs of 22 top Defense Department officials who participated in the meeting — including himself.

In separate interviews last week with Bill Keller, a Washington correspondent of *The New York Times*, the two men were asked if the polygraph is really a useful tool in protecting American military secrets against espionage.

## General Stilwell: A Necessary Security Tool



General Stilwell. We believe very strongly that it is a unique tool to be used as a supplement to all our other personnel security investigative techniques, to give us greater assurance than we have now that we are doing everything we can to thwart hostile intelligence efforts.

**Q. Why has this Administration expanded the use of polygraphs?**

**A.** The record would indicate that the intelligence-gathering efforts of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies and other surrogates have increased over the last few years.

It is significant that we have now a record of 10 individuals awaiting trial for espionage. That suggests something in the way of an increase.

The evidence has also become clear in the last few years of the overwhelming dependence of Soviet defense industry on American technology.

**Q. Why can't we catch these people using more traditional background checks?**

**A.** We have found that some of the traditional methods have become less effective.

One reason is the Privacy Act of 1974, which has tended to make friends, neighbors and employers more reluctant to talk about individuals when they are interviewed by our field representatives.

Another is the very large number of people that we're investigating, as contrasted with the staff that's available.

**Q. What about that critical report by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment?**

**A.** On the basis of the experiences of the C.I.A., the National Security Agency and the Department of Defense over a good many years, we simply disagreed with their findings. In our view, they used a very limited body of the studies which are extant.

### Division Among Experts

The fact is the experts are divided. We do not say that the polygraph is an instrument to detect lies or to affirm truth. It's a diagnostic tool that measures certain physiological reactions.

We really believe that in the hands of a very, very professional operator — and we consider our people to be of that ilk — it has a very high rate of accuracy in determining the physiological reactions to a 'yes' or a 'no' question.

We put great faith in what will happen pretest and posttest. Particularly in criminal investigations, we get a remarkable amount of admissions from individuals before they're even strapped up.

We get an even larger percentage of admissions after the test, when the operator sits down with the individual to ask him if he can account for an indication of deception.

**Q. Much of the success then depends on the subject believing that the test works?**

**A.** A lot of it depends on the fact that the man believes, yes.

**Q. What about a foreign agent who has been trained to beat the test, or taught to believe that the test is meaningless?**

**A.** From my own personal experience, a man would have to be a pretty hardened and inveterate liar. Remember, he has to control three different, quite discrete reactions. The most difficult one of all might be the skin response.

CONTINUED